Anarchy without Opposition

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2012

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To oppose something is to maintain it.

—Ursula K. Le Guin, The Left Hand of Darkness

I have a memory. It was 1984: a presidential election year in the United States. We had a mock election in school. To learn about the process? To start practicing early? I was eight years old. Only one person in our class voted for Walter Mondale against Ronald Reagan. When these results were read aloud, the girl in front of me turned around and pointedly asked, "It was you, wasn't it?" It wasn't.

After school (that day? another?) a boy from my class asked me if I was a Democrat or a Republican. When I said, "Neither," he was perplexed. "You have to be one or the other," he responded, with all the assurance of one stating an obvious and unquestionable Truth. "Well I'm not," I insisted. I knew you didn't have to be; my parents voted, but they didn't identify themselves with either party. In my mind's eye, this boy's face screws up with outraged and frustrated disbelief. "You have to be one or the other!"

Democrat or Republican? Gay or straight? Man or woman? Capitalist or anticapitalist? Anarchist or archist?

Us or them?

I have a memory from a very different time and place: London, 2002. I traveled down from Edinburgh with a woman from ACE, the social centre we were involved in, to attend Queeruption. It was my first queer anarchist event. On the way, I learned loads about menstruation. Once there, I remember chatting to another guy. He found out I identified as an anarchist and started asking me, were you at such and such summit protest? Nope. How about this one or that one? No. No. He looked really puzzled and maybe even asked how I could be an anarchist without converging outside the G8, WTO, IMF, or other gatherings of elites. Isn't that what anarchists do?

Anarchist politics are usually defined by their opposition to state, capitalism, patriarchy, and other hierarchies. My aim in this essay is to queer that notion of anarchism in a number of ways. To queer is to make strange, unfamiliar, weird; it comes from an old German word meaning to cross. What new possibilities arise when we learn to cross, to blur, to undermine, or overflow the hierarchical and binary oppositions we have been taught to believe in?

Hierarchy relies on separation. Or rather, the belief in hierarchy relies on the belief in separation. Neither is fundamentally true. Human beings are extrusions of the ecosystem—we are not separate, independent beings. We are interdependent bodies, embedded in a natural world itself embedded in a vast universe. Likewise, all the various social patterns we create and come to believe in are imaginary (albeit with real effects on our bodyminds). Their existence depends entirely on our belief, our obedience, our behavior. These in turn are shaped by imagined divisions. To realize that the intertwined hierarchical oppositions of hetero/homo, man/woman, whiteness/color, mind/body, rational/emotional, civilized/savage, social/natural, and more are all imaginary is perhaps a crucial step in letting go of them. How might we learn to cross the divide that does not really exist except in our embodied minds?

This, for me, is the point of queer: to learn to see the world through new eyes, to see not only what might be possible but also what already exists (despite the illusions of hierarchy). I write this essay as an invitation to perceive anarchism, to perceive life, differently. I'm neither interested in recruiting you, nor turning you queer. My anarchism is not better than your anarchism. Who am I to judge? Nor is my anarchism already queer. It is always becoming queer. How? By learning to keep queering, again and again, so that my perspective, my politics, and my presence can be fresh, alive.

Queering might allow recognition that life is never contained by the boxes and borders the mind invents. Taxonomies of species or sexualities, categories of race or citizenship, borders between nations or classes or types of politics—these are fictions. They are never necessary. To be sure, fictions have their uses. Perhaps in using them, we may learn to hold them lightly so that we, in turn, are not held by them.

Of Opposites & Oppositions

> *..how to be one's self and yet in oneness with others, to feel deeply with
> all human beings and still retain one's own characteristic qualities.
> This seems to me to be the basis upon which the mass and the indi-
> vidual, the true democrat and the true individuality, man and woman,
> can meet without antagonism and opposition.
> —Emma Goldman, "The Tragedy of Women's Emancipation"

If everyone inspired by anarchism agreed exactly on what it was, how it worked and how it felt, would it still be anarchism?

> Everybody on earth knowing
> that beauty is beautiful
> makes ugliness.
> Everybody knowing
> their goodness is good
> makes wickedness.
> —Lao Tzu[1]

I notice how often anarchism, and anarchy, is defined in opposition to the State, capitalism, and all other forms of hierarchical structure. Not domination, but liberation. Not capitalist, but (libertarian) communist. Why?

Oh, I'm not opposed to opposition! I just have some questions. One is about borders—drawing lines on a map and then claiming that they are real. Isn't this the operation at the heart of the state? And isn't this what happens when you or I want to draw a clear line between us, good anarchists, and them, evil archists? We this, they that. The questioning of borders is at the heart of queer theory.

Conventional lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender politics is based on opposites: we an oppressed minority and they the privileged majority. In this version, the problem is inequality and the answer is legal protection. Queer theory troubles this, suggesting instead, in my mind, that the problem comes from belief in the identities. The thing about opposites is that they depend on each other to exist: straight is not gay, gay is not straight and bisexuality still confuses people. This leads to all sorts of possibilities for control—we learn to ask ourselves and each other, is he really…? Is she really…? Am I really…? We're encouraged to believe that our sense of gender and who we fancy tell us who we are and where we fit in a sexual hierarchy imagined to already exist. Whereas a stateoriented LGBT politics tries to challenge the hierarchies of heter/ homo, cis/trans, while keeping the identities, queer politics might ask how the identities themselves might already be state-like with their borders and policing.

[1] Lao Tzu (trans. Ursula K. Le Guin), Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way (Boston,

I have similar questions about anarchist and other identities. How much energy that could go into creating other-than-state-like ways of living gets lost to efforts to appear anarchist enough? I know I'm not the only one who suffers from anarcho-perfectionism! Likewise, I've seen loads of energy go into arguments about whether so and so is really anarchist or not, or such and such is really anarchism.

On the flip side, I once had a very interesting conversation with a man who owned a furniture making company. We had a lot of areas of agreement and he seemed very interested in anarchism. I suggested that when he retired he could leave his factory to all of the workers to be run as a cooperative. He responded, plaintively, "but I'm a capitalist."

What kinds of politics might become possible if we all learn to be less concerned with conforming to certain labels and more capable of listening to the complexity of our desires? My concern, here, is that opposition—a politics of opposites that push against each other, lean on each other—might get in the way of the listening.

A memory-story[2] : a few years ago, I lived in a former mining village outside of Edinburgh. I was greatly distressed at hearing the single working-class woman next door shouting horrific things at her children nearly every morning. She would curse at them, sometimes shouting how she hated them. It was nearly unbearable. How could I talk to her about it? Then, I took a course on non-violent communication—a strategy without opposition (more on this below). It taught me to communicate in a way that made it easier for her to hear my feelings and desires. The opportunity came when I found a ball in "my" garden (we don't own land, we are part of land) and she was in "hers." I threw the ball over the privet hedge and asked her how she was finding single parenting. "It must be hard," I said. I then told her that when I heard her shouting in the mornings I felt frightened because it reminded me of things from my own childhood.[3] She didn't say anything to me then, but the shouting stopped and her daughter started talking to me.

More recently, this skill again served me well. On my way to London, where I was going to speak about academia and activism, I got into a conversation about politics with a man who identified as conservative. Terrorism came up and I asked if we were any better than them; quoting a Chumbawamba t-shirt I said, "War is terrorism on a bigger budget." He looked thoughtful and a hippie-looking French guy behind him laughed and wrote it down. Then, a very big and very angry looking man stood up and asked if I had just said that war is terrorism. I nodded and he said, "I'm in the Army." He looked furious and I thought there was a good chance he might punch me. I suddenly found myself in his shoes, sensing what he might be feeling, wanting. I looked him in the eye and asked, gently, "Are you angry because you want respect for yourself and your fellow soldiers?" He looked away, his face and shoulders softening, and muttered, "I guess everyone is entitled to their opinion."

What might have happened if I had opposed him?

What might an anarchy refusing to be contained by the borders of its opposites look like? How might anarchism be continually queered, listening across lines of identity and ideology? Now, I'm not saying that anarchism should include everything. I am saying that interesting things are likely to happen if folk inspired by anarchism make connections with folk who see things differently,

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MA: Shambhala, 1997), 4.

[2] I borrow this term from Kristina Nell Weaver whose anarcho-buddhist geography writing reminds me that memories are not the truth of what has happened in the past, but the stories that our minds create in the present.

[3] I've written about this in an essay. See "Fantasies of an Anarchist Sex Educator," in Anarchism and Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power, ed. J. Heckert and R. Cleminson (London: Routledge, 2010).

who do things differently. To do so is not simply to try to convince others that anarchism is right, but perhaps even to let go of such judgments.

•••

> Beyond right and wrong, there is a field.
> I will meet you there.
> —Rumi

I yearn for honesty, complexity and compassion. I don't want to be asked, or told, to choose from a list of options already defined, already decided, already judged. I want to have a discussion. Connection. Intercourse. A chance to listen and to be listened to: giving and receiving, receiving and giving. Let's experience different possibilities for identities, for relationships, for politics. Let's meet.

It is this which draws me again and again to anarchism. And not just to anarchism; I am too promiscuous for that.[4] My anarchism has no straight lines, no borders, no purity, no opposites. No living things do. And I like my anarchy alive.

Ok, I'll be honest. My anarchism can grow rigid, bordered, oppositional. I know the satisfaction of imagining myself more radical than others. The thing is, this comes with the risk of being not-radical-enough, or even, not-really-an-anarchist. It also gets in the way of getting along with people, of working together, of even meeting. So, when my anarchism is rigid, what are the chances of experiencing anarchy?

[4] See D. Shannon and A. Willis, "Theoretical Polyamory: Some Thoughts on Loving, Thinking, and Queering Anarchism," Sexualities, 13(4) (2010): 433-443.

Reading Stories Differently

> But these stories weren't gospel. They weren't Truth. They were essays at the truth. Glances, glimpses of sacredness. One was not asked to believe, only to listen.
> —Ursula K. Le Guin, The Telling

A friend of mine, who does both activisty and scholarly things, recently made disparaging comments about the queer theory that is only about "learning a different way to read a novel." And indeed, one of the first books to be labeled queer theory was Eve Sedgwick's Between Men, a book about nineteenth-century English literature. It was, at the same time, an exploration of patterns of oppression in particular cultural norms of love, sex, friendship, gender, and intimacy. Recognizing these patterns came from learning to read novels differently. In drawing attention to love and desire between men in apparently heterosexual novels, the point is perhaps not to say that this is really what the story is about. Rather, it unsettles our notion of how things really are and, therefore, what is possible.

Is this so different from the storytelling of Peter Kropotkin? Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution, invited a different reading of Darwin's theory, different from those who saw evolution as justification for Empire, those who imagined that survival of the fittest meant the most fit, the most dominant, the most masculine, the most "advanced." For Kropotkin, and I think for Darwin, too, fittest meant best able to fit in with other beings in an ecosystem. In other words, to cooperate.

* * *

So, is cooperation better than competition? Is queer better than straight? Are those the right answers? Is that how I should live my life?

The way I see it, at the moment anyway, neither queer nor anarchy is about finding the right answers or working out the right way to live. Both are about the experience of connecting with others, with self. I almost always find it harder to connect with someone who is insisting that their story is THE story, their truth THE truth. Where's the space left for my story, my truth? Your story, your truth? How can different people, different creatures, different stories and voices learn to fit together if any one story tries to take up all of the space? Like the Zapatistas, I want to live in "a world where many worlds fit."

One of the principles of permaculture, an ethical design system or perhaps a revolution disguised as gardening, is that edges are the most productive areas in a system. Where the river meets the bank, the forest the meadow, or the sea the shore, there will be an abundance of life. The more that anarchism, a many branched river in our social ecosystem, mixes and mingles with swamp and stone, soil and soul, the more diverse forms of life will benefit.

Conversely, moral high ground is a cold, barren, and lonely land. I know—I've been there and I return from time to time. Highly rational and fiercely intellectual, it leaves no space for

doubt, for complexity of feeling. Warmth toward self and other dwindles, for the cold numbs the heart. Shelter from pain, numbness, may be a form of protection from the horrors of witnessing violence and violation. Ah, but the numbed heart is also impervious to joy. And how queer can life be without joy? Seeking further distance and separation from the pain by climbing that moral high ground, I risk forgetting that my heart yearns for community, vitality, and play. Perhaps it is less of a forgetting and more of a learning not to listen. For pain is a signal, an awareness of being alive, a reminder of what is desired. Learning not to listen. Isn't that, too, the nature of the State?

Care of the Self

> …the interplay of the care of the self…blends into pre-existing relations, giving them a new coloration and greater warmth. The care of the self—or the attention that one devotes to the care that others should take of themselves—appears then as an intensification of social relations.
> —Michael Foucault, The History of Sexuality, vol. 3: The Care of the Self

In a queerly anarchist paper, Sian Sullivan asks, is an other world possible?[1] When state/empire/capital depends on carefully and continuously producing clear and hierarchical divisions between and within people, how can we make space for that which has been designated other? Declaring a politics to be non-hierarchical, anarchist, feminist, safe, or queer does not magically make this happen. It takes a different kind of magic—practice.

These hierarchies aren't just "out there." They are also in here: in the way we hold our bodies, in our thoughts, in our emotional reactions, in the ways we learn to see the world and to imagine what is real and what is possible. These hierarchies arise in the ways we relate to ourselves, to other humans, and to the rest of the natural world. And that's okay.

(Bear with me, here!)

There's this social psychologist called Thomas Scheff who was trying to understand why people conform (or, perhaps, why it's hard to be queer).[2] Drawing on a rather Kropotkinesque view of evolution, he reckoned that humans are basically cooperative and that maintaining this cooperation is a basic function of our emotions. We feel good ("pride") when our social bonds are strong and we feel bad ("shame") when relationships are at risk, because we depend on these relationships to live. Now, this is all well and good for getting along with each other. The trouble starts when we feel ashamed of our shame and get into this nasty spiral of beating ourselves up. He calls this pathological shame and offers it as a suggestion for understanding all the ways in which people conform to things that we know aren't good for us, for other people, or for the rest of the planet. This is why I say it's okay that hierarchies arise. If trying to be a good anarchist means always being anti-hierarchical, then anarchist relationships are always at risk of not being anarchist enough, thus feeding the spiral of pathological shame, of rigidity, of the State. Modesty may offer the middle ground, the convivial edge, between excessive pride and pathological shame.[3]

Since then, another radical social psychologist has developed a more complex emotional model of domination. Marshall Rosenberg, the founding practitioner of non-violent communication

[1] See S. Sullivan, "An Other World is Possible? On Representation, Rationalism and Romanticism in Social Forums," Ephemera, 5(2) (2005): 370-392. Online at http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/5-2/5-2ssullivan.pdf (accessed January 25, 2012).

[2] See T. J. Scheff, Microsociology: Discourse, Emotion, and Social Structure (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[3] See Ursula K Le Guin, "The Conversation of the Modest" in Wild Girls (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2011).

(NVC), also reckons that conformity and domination start in our everyday relationships.[4] He talks about the concept of emotional slavery—feeling responsible for other people's emotions. What happens when the beautiful anarchist desire for freedom and equality is held in this cage? I see in myself and in others an overwhelming compulsion to try to make everything equal, to make myself and others free. To make everything okay.

What if everything is already okay, even pain and shame? Rosenberg offers the radically compassionate perspective that absolutely everyone is doing the best thing they can imagine to meet life-serving desires/needs (e.g., order, community, play, food, shelter, etc.). There is no such thing as evil; there is nothing to oppose. Instead, we might learn to both empathize with the desires of others and to express our own. Sure, we might disagree about strategies for meeting those needs. I still get angry, sometimes, when seeing strategies that meet some people's needs while ignoring others (like war, private property, or bullying). And blaming someone for that can be temporarily satisfying. The thing is, if I blame other people for not being perfectly anarchist already, then I end up blaming myself, too. I'm no perfect anarchist, either. How could I be? Where would I have learned these skills? Like everyone, I'm still practicing.

This is why I invite you to consider the very queer notion of an anarchism not based on opposition, but a politics that starts off accepting everything just as it is. From the basis of acceptance, we might then ask, what service can be offered? How can anarchy be nurtured, rather than demanded, forced? What ways of living and relating can we practice that are even more effective at meeting the needs of everyone for life, love, and freedom? And in what ways might we learn to accept the pain we feel when that doesn't happen, instead of distracting ourselves with resentment or chocolate? And in what ways might we learn to be gentle with ourselves when we realize we've been drawn to strategies of distraction or even domination?

[4] See Marshall Rosenberg, Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life (Encinitas, California: PuddleDancer Press, 2003).

Stillness in motion

> Prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.
> —Michel Foucault, Preface to Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.

Bodies need to move, to play, to be well. Sedentary culture leads to great suffering. Bodies kept in line, in chairs at work stations or school desks. Bodies kept in order. The same goes for thoughts, for feelings.

To hold tightly—to shame, resentment, or any emotion or any story of how the world really is—is to be held tightly. This is not freedom. To hold gently is to be held gently. This, to me, is freedom. No opposition, no tension, between intimacy and spaciousness. Instead, there is a gentle dance that comes from a deep stillness.

To become anarchist, to become queer, is not easy. To learn to cross lines, to see that the lines are not even real, is a radical transformation for those of us who were raised to believe in them. But it need not be a struggle. Struggling against the world as it is, struggling against my experience, gets in my way. Sure, the world is not the world of my dreams. Why should it be? To stop my pain, or yours? Running from pain is a noisy affair. It distracts.

To learn to listen to yourself, to "let your life speak"[1] requires silence, peace. Otherwise, I know I get caught up in a rush of stories and feelings about what I should be doing, how I've not done enough. I forget to rest, to play. Is that radical?

Hold on, you might say. Of course we all need to rest and play. But how can we not oppose, for example, the Wall in Palestine/Israel? How can you say it's a fiction? It's concrete. Material. So, too, are the bullets and the tanks that maim and kill.

Bodies and the bullets are real. Painfully real. The concrete does not self-organize into a Wall. No border, invented by human minds, asserts its own existence. No gun shoots itself. There is human action behind every border, every wall. And behind these actions: emotions, beliefs. Why do some Israeli people support the Wall? Because, as I understand it, they are afraid. They are taught to believe that at least some Palestinians are dangerous enemies. They desire security, life. When people act as soldiers, they believe, perhaps, that the border is real and must be defended. They may believe that those on one side are inherently different from those on the other. Or perhaps they believe, with their hearts and minds, that they have no choice other than to follow orders. To do otherwise, to relate otherwise, might simply be unimaginable.

[1] See Parker J. Palmer, Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

A State of Mind

> The challenge we face is made up of specific patterns of behaviour among Settlers and our own people: choices made to support mentalities that developed in serving the colonization of our lands as well as the unrestrained greed and selfishness of mainstream society. We must add to this the superficial…justifications for the unnatural and misunderstood place and purpose of human beings in the world, an emphatic refusal to look inward, and an aggressive denial of the value of nature.
> —Taiaiake Alfred, Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom

> …queer ecology is both about seeing beauty in the wounds of the world and taking responsibility to care for the world as it is.
> —Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, "Unnatural Passions?: Notes Toward a Queer Ecology"

I find myself coming again and again to what seems to me as a very queer conclusion. The most radical thing I do is meditate daily.

Raised in Settler society, I've learned to resist looking inward, to be frightened of what I might find there. But it's the best way I've found "to be one's self and yet in oneness with others, to feel deeply with all human beings and still retain one's own characteristic qualities," as Emma has called us to be, to feel. And so I invite you to consider, just to consider, meditation as an anarchist practice of freedom.

Here's a queer proposal: the State is always a state of mind. It's putting life in boxes and then judging it in terms of those boxes, those borders, as if they were what really mattered. It's trying to get other people to do what you want them to do without so much regard for their needs, their desires. It's self-consciousness, self-policing, self-promotion, self-obsession. It's anxiety and depression. It's hyperactivity stemming from the fantasy that being seen to be doing something is better than doing nothing, even if what you're doing might cause more harm than good. It's resentment at self and others for not doing it right, for not being good enough. It's the belief that security comes from control. And it's a source of tremendous suffering in the world.

It's also something I do. When I look inward, when I meditate, I can see how much the mind is attached to individualistic stories of myself: as important, as weak, as wonderful, as useless, as victim, hero, or villain. The stories fluctuate and change form. And when I believe them, they affect all of my relationships. I, too, can perform the State.

Judith Butler may have taught me that the performance of a role is merely a copy without original, but it is meditation that lets me see it with clear vision. Sitting down each morning, focusing my mind, observing the thoughts and emotions that pass through, I learn to not identify with them, to not get caught up in them, to not reject them. I'm learning the "art of allowing

everything to be as it is,"[1] which in turn helps with the many challenges of caring "for the world as it is," of seeing beauty in wounds. I'm learning to be playful with my sense of who I am, to let go the borders, the policing. It's so much easier for me to connect with others when the walls of the heart, of the individualized self, come down. And it's easier to let go of the walls if I don't judge them. Of course we learn to protect ourselves.

I practice meditation, not just for myself, but so that I can go out into the world unarmed. Unarmored. Enamored. When I feel a love for life itself, I see anarchy everywhere. I notice all the little ways, and not-so-little ways, that people already support each other, already speak for themselves, already listen to each other, already make decisions, and act together. These aren't just "seeds beneath the snow," as Colin Ward put it. They are blossoming flowers. An other world is not only possible, it already exists. I've felt it.

And when I again get caught up in my own thoughts, my own desires, my own stories about who I am, and who you are, what should have happened, how the world should be…then I see so little outside the dramas of my own mind. Everything I see, everyone I meet, I reinterpret through the lens of those fictions. I take myself and my beliefs very, very seriously. Just like the State.

Is it radical to hate myself for that? Is it radical to hate "cops," "capitalists," "politicians," "racists," or "homophobes" for that? In my own experience, the two are intimately intertwined. Inseparable.

And so I go inward before going out into the world. Letting my mind grow still, I am not ruled by my thoughts. Letting my heart open, I am able to love myself and others. And if I am called to fight, to protect those under threat, let me do it with love. Because if I'm not loving, it's not my revolution.

[1] See Adyashanti, True Meditation: Discover the Freedom of Pure Awareness (Louisville, CO: Sounds True, 2006).

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2012

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